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Tribute to Leslie Hewes (1906-1999)



Leslie Hewes, the eminent Geographer and Great Plains scholar, died in his sleep on 7 March 1999, aged 93. He remained active on the tennis court and in his scholarship and travels right to the end, and his passing leaves a large gap in the Department of Geography at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and in the world of Plains scholarship that cannot be filled.

Dr. Hewes was born on 25 February 1906 on a homestead near Guthrie, Oklahoma Territory. His father had obtained the homestead in the land run of 1889. The early death of his father meant that life was frugal, and often there was not enough to eat. But fortunately the University of Oklahoma did not charge residents tuition in 1924. Dr. Hewes began his academic life there, first as a Spanish major, then as a Geographer.

Graduating in 1928, Dr. Hewes moved to Berkeley to study under Carl Sauer, the preeminent American Geographer of the Twentieth Century. His dissertation, awarded in 1940 (while completing the dissertation, Dr. Hewes was an instructor, then an assistant professor, at the University of Oklahoma) was a study of land and life in the Cherokee country. Later (1978) published as a monograph, this was one of the first serious engagements by geographers with the study of native Americans. In 1945, Dr. Hewes became Professor of Geography at the University of Nebraska, and his name was subsequently synonymous with that program.

From 1945 to 1968, Dr. Hewes chaired the Nebraska Department. In 1974, at the age of 70, he retired from the University, though certainly not from scholarship. In fact, he published three articles and two encyclopedia entries in the last three years of his life, causing his colleagues to joke that he was making a run on tenure!

Altogether Dr. Hewes published forty-two book chapters and articles (many of them in the flagship journals of the field). His regional focus was the Great Plains and his topical interests included agricultural risk, pioneer settlement and landscapes, and the impact of humans on the land. His 1973 book, *The Suitcase Farming Frontier: A Study in the Historical Geography of the Central Great Plains*, pulls together those interests and reveals his deep knowledge of the region, a knowledge gained from a lifetime of living there, as well as from intensive field work and interviewing. Dr. Hewes built this publication record while serving as Chair, teaching a heavy load of courses (in time, he taught every course on the books except Cartography) , and directing thirty-four Ph.D. dissertations and twenty-seven M.A. theses. Through his students, who now are now senior scholars at universities throughout the land, and through his example as a hardworking, original, and open-minded man, Dr. Hewes made a singular contribution to American Geography and Great Plains studies.

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